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ABSTRACT

Many of the difficulties experienced by men in group psychotherapy are inherent in their socialization process that brings about male gender role expectations. The need to be continually competitive, autonomous, unemotional, strong, in control of oneself and of others, dominant, and action-achievement-solution oriented can, unless reframed, work against the goal of achieving individual and collective psychological growth. It is stated that men seem to know that modern society sees them as expendable, that they play only a minor role in evolution and seem to have lost their roles as protectors and providers. Additionally they do not seem to accept the proposition that they do not have to prove their adequacy and worth. Almost unavoidable feelings of inadequacy result in a need to prove or at least maintain one's image of manliness. While these parameters of the male role are admirable and were vital in the past, in the group therapy environment they obviously work against the goal of achieving self-understanding and psychological growth. The question for psychologists who work with men in groups is how to use these tendencies to help expand masculinity to include behaviors that lead to positive mental health, and how to retain the positive aspects of the male role while making it more flexible and opening it up to new possibilities, reframing and expanding the definition to include a broader range of behaviors. (ABL)

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Men in Groups

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ABSTRACT

Most psychologists who work with men comment that they have more problems in the therapy group situation than do women; this is obvious. What is less obvious are the underlying reasons why this is the case. It is the theme of this article that many of the difficulties experienced by men in group psychotherapy are inherent in their socialization process that brings about male gender role expectations in this society. Aspects of the male gender role that are stumbling blocks in group psychotherapy include striving for autonomy, control, and rationality, dominance, competitiveness, status consciousness, and a devaluation of the role of emotions, and of listening without judgement. These ideas are elaborated, and a call for expansion of the limitations of the male role is given.

Men in Groups

Last fall I sat huddled with a couple of buddies, in the rain, watching a football game that MSU was losing. The rain was drizzling down, the wind was blowing, and we were cold. One of my friends turned and in all seriousness said, "How come male bonding hurts so much?" Well, that's partly what this is about, how come males sometimes have difficulty achieving growth in group psychotherapy?

By now we are all fairly familiar with the parameters of the male role as it has been socialized in American culture: One should above all be independent/autonomous, strong and in control; One should stifle emotions, work, perform well and solve problems, compete vigorously, and dominate when possible.

These parameters have served society well down through the centuries. They have been a cultural imperative that seems to have resulted from the needs of society. The male enjunction (sic) to impregnate, protect and provide, required what Gilmore (1990), in his extensive study of numerous cultures around the world, calls a "special moral system" to evolve. This special system which defined manhood was required to ensure appropriate behavior in men.

Today, the need to provide no longer involves slaying mastadons and the need to protect has come to mean to put on a special uniform and travel to distant lands for that purpose. Nevertheless, the role with all its ramifications lives on. Despite its obvious positive qualities, it often serves to hinder growth in men who join groups for that very purpose.

Psychological growth is said to occur in groups when members bond with each other through self disclosure, genuineness, empathy, supportiveness, sharing of feelings, identification with others, relationship building, and so forth. Yalom (1975) points to "interpersonal learning", "catharsis", and "insight" as the most therapeutic aspects of group therapy. By these he means the "here and now" interchanges among individuals about their emotions, feelings, and reactions to each other.

The major point of this paper is that parameters of the male role often play and inhibitory role in group psychotherapy. One reason is because the role is taught in childhood in a way that makes it especially resistent to change. A second reason is that it has become an inflexible, impossible-to-achieve ideal; striving for it and falling short becomes a set up for feelings of inadequacy and shame.

It is taught through a process of eliminating inappropriate behaviors often by shaming them rather than through the reinforcement of appropriate behaviors. As a boy grows from babyhood, no one specifically tells him how he is supposed to be as a male. Rather he comes to learn quickly what he is <u>not</u> supposed to do: play with dolls, cry too much, spend too much time holding on to mom, paint his nails bright colors, and so forth. The myriad inappropriate behaviors get eliminated one by one through a process of disapproval, dismay reactions, love withdrawal, and other forms of shaming.

Shame is painful. What we know about behaviors and situations that result in pain is that people first escape and

then later avoid them. Further we know, that behaviors learned in this escape/avoidance mode are the most difficult to extinguish. Gilmore (1990) points out that "Manhood ideologies force men to shape up on penalty of being robbed of their identity, a threat apparently worse than death."(p221)

As an inflexible ideal all one can do is strive toward it and try to minimize the instances of falling short. As most men have been punished for falling short at times, almost all men feel inadequate in comparison to this ideal. Many men have told me this but three especially--- three men who I have admired for their achievements: Off the court Kareem Abdul Jabbar seems to exude quiet self confidence. At the time I saw him interviewed he was arguably the best center professional basketball has ever had. His almost apologetic commentary about his performance on the basketball court was "I always come away feeling that I could have done better."; On another occasion, I listened to Jack Nicholson say with all sincerity, that when he acts he is doing his best to "avoid making a fool out of myself."; In an interview with Ted Turner, the swashbuckling, risk taking, entrepreneur multi-millionaire, I read that his biggest fear was of falling down, losing it all, not surviving,feeling "constantly at war, always fighting to survive,"---fighting to avoid failure.

The stories of these three eminently successful men have the common thread of fear of inadequacy, of failure, of being found out to be not up to the task. It was a lesson well learned in childhood; to not be able to live up to the "real man" code" was a potential for shame that was to be avoided.

There is more than a suggestion in the literature that men exhibit strong resistances in psychotherapy (Osherson and Krugman, 1990; Meth and Pasick, 1990) and that they have some difficulties in achieving growth in groups. Osherson and Krugman are very specific about the role played by shame in affecting men's behavior in the psychotherapy situation. The purpose of the following comments is to take a closer look at how the socialized male role, often learned through shaming and shame avoidance, and maintained through avoidance of exposure of inadequacy tends to inhibit males from using the group therapy situation to achieve personal growth.

If one accepts the above definition of the male role, and the explanation of the parameters of group psychotherapy that lead to growth, one comes to the conclusion that they are practically mutually exclusive. Psychotherapy appears to be almost the antithesis of masculinity (Meth and Pasick, 1990) To do what is asked for in a psychotherapeutic situation is like asking a man to become something his father would not respect, yea may have despised. To sit in a room, talk about problems, feelings, and relationships, listen to others, avoid advice giving and posing solutions, disclose innermost aspects of oneself in a vulnerable manner, to trust in the healing quality of talk, to trust in "fallow time' and take no action is almost the antithesis of the male experience (Keen, 1991).

More specifically, the need to be continually competitive, autonomous, unemotional, strong, in control of yourself and of

others, dominant, and action-achievement-solution oriented can, unless reframed, work against the goal of achieving individual and collective psychological growth.

To be competitive implies struggling to win and also implies the placement of competitors on a hierarchy of success at winning. The sports analogy is obvious but for many men, the hierarchy exists not only in sport but in life; the struggle is to rise or at least maintain your place on the hierarchy. One does this by adhering to the role or by at least keeping to yourself ideas and feelings that don't conform, thus retaining your place through silence. Tannen (1990) uses this tendency on the part of men to use communication as a means of establishing and maintaining status as a central theme in her book. In any case, trust is a victim and the other therapeutic aspects of group therapy cannot operate.

The boy learns early in life that he is different from his mother. He moves to disconnect from her and is reinforced for striving for autonomy (Chodorow, 1978; Bergman, 1991). This tendency to disconnect and remain disconnected can become a life pattern. The possibilities for relationship with others is curtailed. Group process depends on relationship forming.

To be autonomous is to not need others. Indication that one is needful becomes a potentially shameful event. It also signals to others that the person is weakened, vulnerable and potentially a candidate to be moved down in the hierarchy of the group. Again trust, bonding, and interpersonal relating suffer.

Almost any display of emotion, or concern can be interpreted as indicating possible weakness. "Real men" are strong; any sign of weakness is to be avoided. Divulging information about yourself, your doubts, problems, fears, conflicts is doubly dangerous because it implies weakness and because it gives your competitors finger-holds in your armor that they can use to get one up on you. So maintenance of control over your emotions is vital to maintaining your image as a man. Catharsis and its healing process, however, cannot take place.

It seems fitting, while we're talking about weakness, that the role of fear of homosexuality, as a special case of weakness and potential for shaming should be addressed. One could hardly discuss the dynamics of men in groups without discussing fear of homosexuality. Homosexuality is seen by most heterosexual men as weak, unnatural and shameful. Any behavior that tends to suggest that one is homosexual is to be avoided. Once in an all male group I commented that I had noticed that we rarely complimented each other on clothes, appearance or even on good verbal discourse. After a little discussion it became clear that the group members felt almost to a person, that paying another person a compliment, unless it had to do with some kind of performance or achievement, could be interpreted as homosexual behavior and could result not only on one losing his place on the hierarchy, but dropping off it altogether.

Status--- rank on the hierarchy---allows one to be dominant to control and direct the conversation. Telling the most

outrageous story, knowing more about a particular subject, having inside information, giving advice, and solving other' problems are all signs of status, strength, position on the hierarchy. This frequently leads to what one of my clients has indelicately referred to as a "pissing contest." This "report talk" (Tannen, 1990) takes precedence over the relationship building and process talk and the goal of growth gets sidetracked.

Men seem to know that modern society sees them as expendable, that they play only a minor role in evolution and seem to have lost their roles as protectors and providers. Additionally they don't seem to accept the proposition that they don't have to prove their adequacy and worth. Work, performance, and achievement are one means of disproving their feelings of inadequacy. Unfortunately it only disproves it for a short time and men get stuck in proving it over and over. Just as in sports, last years performance, last years achievement, doesn't count for much. Almost unavoidable feelings of inadequacy result in a need to prove or at least maintain ones image of manliness for fear of being unmasked as not really living up to the code. It is easy to slip into a defensive posture, instead of a receptive one, circumventing feedback and learning.

While these parameters of the male role are admirable and were vital in the past, especially in societies where the environment was harsh and resources were scarce, in the group therapy environment, they obviously work against the goal of

achieving self-understanding and psychological growth. The question for psychologists who work with men in groups is how to use these tendencies to help expand masculinity to include behaviors that lead to positive mental health. To retain the positive aspects of the male role while making it more flexible and opening it up to new possibilities---reframing and expanding the definition to include a broader range of behaviors. The psychotherapy group setting appears to be the best place for this to occur (Nicholas, 1984). In this safer setting, new information and feedback from peers and professionals about beliefs, feelings, and behaviors can lead to an opening up and enlargening, resulting in significant shifts in frames of reference.

An example of reframing with the goal of getting men to pay more attention to the emotions they are feeling is to frame it as paying attention to the "emotional mind" This is not an end in itself but a transitional phase that can lead to stronger emphasis on feelings as the motivators of behavior.

Another example using the idea of expanding the traditional definition of the male role is to use individuality and risk taking, stressed male virtues, to open up what is acceptable behavior. Individuality can be defined to imply doing what one feels is appropriate regardless of male stereotypes. Being open, self disclosing, and trusting, and thus vulnerable can easily be reframed and associated with the male virtues of individualness and risk-taking.

Activity and competitiveness are male virtues that can be used in the therapy group for positive purposes. The "human doing" has been getting some bad press lately, but there is nothing wrong with the human being doing in groups. Activity is not anathema to growth. Thoughtful activities are vehicles for growth. Activities combined with verbal processing of feelings associated with the activities can be extremely growth producing. Cross country skiing, cooking, massaging, arm wrestling, picnicking, and many other activities framed in the right manner can be the backdrop and sometimes even the catalyst for insight and change.

Male competitiveness can also be brought to awareness and used for insight and change. Many close male relationships are based on playful competitive acceptiveness as well as on the processing of thoughts and feelings thereabout. These can highlight feelings of power, competitiveness, failure, inadequacy and loss.

Competition does not preclude intimacy. Mitchell (1986) says that her data indicate that. "There is a group of men who very clearly feel very intimate, close, vulnerable and dependent upon their male friend---and who also feel competitive and masculine with that same male friend. (p.53). Competition is more significant in male relationships than just determining who is best. The competitive-accepting relationship is a kind of relationship in which the competition is a part of the relationship and can help frame the feelings about the

relationship. It is aware, and intense, and enjoyable and accepting. In its intensity, it transcends the physical; it becomes spiritual. Moreover, it can be a vehicle for sharing, connection, and intimacy. In this context, who wins is trivial and irrelevant.

The above ideas on change are minimal and seem in retrospect to be almost feeble beginnings in pursuit of a goal. Perhaps the best answer is increased awareness of the terribly rigid and prescriptive and constrictive nature of the male gender role. "I'm a man, and you will not be telling me what I can do and what I can't do!"

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